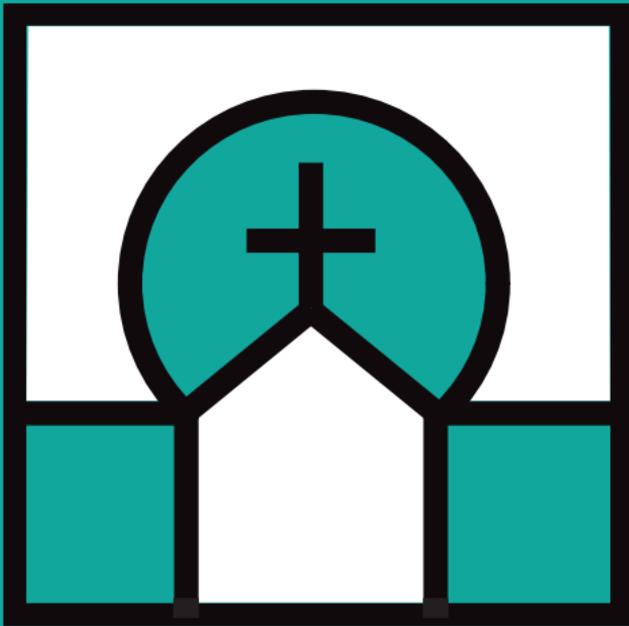


IX 9Marks

Why Should I Join a Church?



**Mark
Dever**

Church Questions

Endorsements for the Church Questions Series

“Christians are pressed by very real questions. How does Scripture structure a church, order worship, organize ministry, and define biblical leadership? Those are just examples of the questions that are answered clearly, carefully, and winsomely in this new series from 9Marks. I am so thankful for this ministry and for its incredibly healthy and hopeful influence in so many faithful churches. I eagerly commend this series.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Sincere questions deserve thoughtful answers. If you’re not sure where to start in answering these questions, let this series serve as a diving board into the pool. These mini-books are winsomely to-the-point and great to read together with one friend or one hundred friends.”

Gloria Furman, author, *Missional Motherhood* and *The Pastor’s Wife*

“As a pastor, I get asked lots of questions. I’m approached by unbelievers seeking to understand the gospel, new believers unsure about next steps, and maturing believers wanting help answering questions from their Christian family, friends, neighbors, or coworkers. It’s in these moments that I wish I had a book to give them that was brief, answered their questions, and pointed them in the right direction for further study. Church Questions is a series that provides just that. Each booklet tackles one question in a biblical, brief, and practical manner. The series may be called Church Questions, but it could be called ‘Church Answers.’ I intend to pick these up by the dozens and give them away regularly. You should too.”

Juan R. Sanchez, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas

Why Should I
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Church Questions

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Why Should I Join a Church?, Mark Dever

Why Should I Join a Church?

Mark Dever

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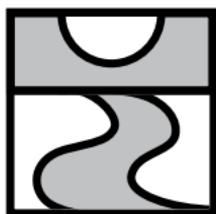
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A new command I give to you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

John 13:34–35



Sometimes college campus ministries will ask me to speak to their students. I've been known, on several occasions, to begin my remarks this way: "If you call yourself a Christian but you are not a member of the church you regularly attend, you might be going to hell."

You could say that it gets their attention.

Now, am I just going for shock value? I don't think so. Am I trying to scare them into church membership? Not really. Am I saying that joining a church makes someone a Christian? Certainly not! Throw any book (or speaker) out the window that says as much.

So why would I begin with this kind of warning? It's because I want them to see something of the urgency of the need for a healthy local church in a Christian's life and to begin sharing the passion for the church that characterizes both Christ and his followers. I want them to see that, for the sake of their souls, they need to join a local church.

If you want to follow Christ but aren't a member of a local church, consider with me seven reasons why you should join one.

1) Join a Church to Display the Gospel

In more than twenty years of pastoral ministry, I've met dozens of folks who are skeptical about the idea of church membership. After all, Christianity is about a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, not about attaching your name to a piece of paper or engaging in church business meetings. In fact, why waste time talking about church membership when we could be talking about Jesus? For some folks, the very idea of church membership seems like a distract-

tion from what should be the most important thing in our lives—the gospel.

I agree, of course, that all Christians should make the gospel the center of their lives. We want to share the gospel with others and see it advance throughout the world. We want our lives to reflect the love of God in the gospel and, as Paul said, walk in a manner “worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27). I’m passionate that every Christian display the gospel in their lives, which is why I’m passionate about church membership.

Church membership wasn’t invented by pastors, ministry leaders, or church growth experts. Membership is the natural outcome of the gospel itself. Perhaps you’ve never considered it, but the gospel is not just about how God saves us *from* the “dominion of darkness”; it’s also a message about how God saves us *into* the “kingdom of the Son he loves”—a kingdom bustling with other redeemed sinners who, like us, are now citizens of heaven (Col. 1:13; see also Eph. 2:19). If you’re passionate about the gospel, then one of the primary ways you display the gospel to the world is by joining a local church. Let’s unpack that idea.

The gospel is a message about how guilty sinners can be reconciled to a holy God through the death and resurrection of Christ. Christians are those who recognize their own moral bankruptcy and, repenting of sin, turn to Christ for forgiveness. Declared righteous in Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, they now gladly live under the rule of Christ, following his commands and seeking to glorify God. Ultimately, a Christian is someone who has been reconciled to God.

Yet that's not all! The gospel not only reconciles us to God but also to his people. One reason so many Christians have minimized the importance of church membership is because they've reduced the gospel to *merely* a personal relationship with God and not much else. But the Bible teaches something quite different.

Sinners are hostile not only to God, but to those who bear his image. Our broken relationship with God creates broken relationships with others. The Bible regularly portrays that reality. In fact, do you remember the first story in the Bible after Adam and Eve's fall and banishment

from the garden? It's the story of one human being murdering another—Cain killing Abel. Sinners want to shove God off his throne and put themselves on it, and, as Cain shows, we're not about to let some other human being take it from us. Not a chance. Adam's act of breaking fellowship with God resulted in an immediate break in fellowship among all human beings. It's every man for himself.

Thus, when the gospel restores our relationship with God, it also restores fellowship between us and other redeemed sinners. When we abandon our hostility toward God, we also abandon our hostility for one another. In other words, Christians are those who now delight in the great commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:34–40). What does the gospel produce in us? Love for God and love for his people.

Being reconciled to God, then, means being reconciled to everyone else who is reconciled to God. This point isn't merely an inference of the gospel message. Jesus and the apostles explicitly

and frequently teach this idea throughout the New Testament.

For instance, in the first half of Ephesians 2, Paul describes the salvation Christ has provided for his people. Many Christians rightly treasure Paul's words that we are saved "by grace . . . through faith" and as a "gift of God—not by works" (Eph. 2:8–9). Yet, after showing how the gospel restores our fellowship with God, Paul turns, in the second half of Ephesians 2, to show how the gospel restores fellowship between all those who are in Christ:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. . . . His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Eph. 2:14–16)

All those who belong to God are "fellow citizens" and "members of God's household" (v. 19).

Christ has destroyed our “hostility” toward one another. In Christ, God’s people have “peace” and are reconciled into “one body.” Paul’s words are inescapably clear: if we’re reconciled to God, we’re reconciled to his people.

Yes, the gospel gives us a personal relationship with God. But according to Scripture, that relationship with God includes meaningful relationships with his people. When we come to Christ, he folds us into a family—a family with actual flesh-and-blood, step-on-your-toes people.

Church membership, therefore, is the natural outgrowth of the gospel. When we receive God’s mercy, we become part of “a people” (1 Pet. 2:10). When we receive God’s grace (Eph. 2:1–10), we are included in a covenant community (Eph. 2:11–20). Reconciled to God, reconciled to his people.

Local churches are the places where we live according to this new reality. We don’t just *say* we’re reconciled, we *show* it. We show it by joining a congregation and committing to love one another and help one another grow in

Christlikeness. We show it by inviting one another into our homes and caring for each other's needs. We show it by confessing our sins to one another and forgiving one another. We show it by putting aside personal preferences and considering the interests of others above our own. We show it by learning and submitting to the word of God together. By joining a church, we commit to other redeemed sinners and show the world that Christ has indeed reconciled us both to God and to each other.

It's not enough to merely have Christian friends with whom we occasionally gather—friends we pick and choose according to our own tastes. What truly displays the gospel is when we commit to love and care for a group of people that includes folks utterly unlike us. We display the gospel when we gather each week to serve people who sometimes share only one thing in common with us: Jesus. We show we are reconciled in Christ when we commit to love *those* people in *that* place—no matter what faults and foibles they may have.

If you're passionate about the gospel, join a local church.

2) Join a Church Because the Bible Requires It

The gospel itself points to our need to be vitally connected to a community of fellow brothers and sisters. But does the Bible ever explicitly mention church membership? If we display the gospel by formally committing to a local church, then shouldn't we see church membership in the New Testament?

I've heard these types of questions dozens of times. Can we really say the Bible requires church membership even though it never says, "Thou shalt join a church"?

I think we can. Let me lay out five reasons why.

New Testament Churches Kept Membership Records

True, the Bible never uses the words "thou shalt join a church," but the New Testament has

plenty of evidence that the early church practiced church membership. For instance, Acts 2 records the start of the church in Jerusalem. In that passage, Peter was preaching to the crowds in Jerusalem and urging them to trust in Christ and repent of their sins (Acts 2:38). How did the people respond?

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. (Acts 2:41)

Notice that the early church *counted* the number of new converts who followed Christ in baptism. They were keeping records. More than that, this verse says that these three thousand believers “were added” to the church—the original 120 disciples in the upper room (Acts 1:15). The early church certainly seemed to practice church membership. They knew exactly who belonged to the congregation and how many members they had.

These three thousand men and women

didn't just get baptized and never show up again. They *acted* like church members. They regularly gathered in the temple to hear the apostles' teaching, to pray, and to celebrate the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42, 46). They were providing for one another's needs (2:45). They were inviting one another into each other's homes (2:46). We even find the church gathering for a members' meeting to discuss how to best care for their widows (6:1–2). We see also that as this local church shared the gospel, they continued to take in more members:

And the Lord *added to their number* daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47)

This church in Jerusalem continued to add more and more members, and by Acts 4:4 their congregation had grown to at least five thousand members. Later in the New Testament, we even find that churches kept lists of widows who were members of the church. The early church kept membership records. The apostles practiced church membership.

Many of us have questions about what it means to live as a Christian in the context of a local church. You may even catch yourself asking, *If I believe in Jesus, why do I need to join a church?* To put it simply, when you are saved from your sin, you are saved into a community characterized by fellowship and accountability. Best-selling author Mark Dever presents seven biblical reasons why church membership is essential for displaying the gospel in your life.

Church Questions is a series that seeks to provide ordinary Christians with sound and accessible biblical teaching by answering common questions they have about church life. Each volume offers biblical answers and practical applications with the goal of nurturing healthy church practice and commitment.

Mark Dever (PhD, Cambridge University) is the senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, and president of 9Marks (9Marks.org). Dever has authored over a dozen books and speaks at conferences nationwide.

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